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1999 AND THE IRRUPTION OF THEORY

1999 Y LA IRRUPCIÓN DE LA TEORÍA

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Abstract:
The paper reviews key fictions which appeared in 1999: the first *Matrix* film, the third Harry Potter novel and the fourth television series of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* The paper contends that one of the immediate effects of these texts, each a paradigm of the postmodern aesthetic, was to promote the growth of crossover academic-popular cultural studies. It is argued that important though this secondary literature is, the immediate political and cultural context of these texts' times needs to remain in sharper focus if we are to assess them properly.

Key words: The Matrix; Harry Potter; Buffy The Vampire Slayer; Millennium; 1999; postmodernism.

Resumen:
El presente artículo analiza algunas de las ficciones clave que aparecieron en 1999: la primera película de *Matrix*, la tercera novela de Harry Potter y la cuarta temporada de *Buffy, cazavampiros.* Nuestro trabajo trata de demostrar que uno de los efectos inmediatos de estos textos, paradigmáticos de la estética postmoderna cada uno de ellos, consistió en fomentar el crecimiento de los estudios culturales a medio camino entre lo académico y lo popular. Al mismo tiempo, el presente artículo, más allá de la importancia de esta bibliografía secundaria, defiende la necesidad de tener en cuenta el contexto político y cultural de la época de estos textos para realizar un análisis correcto de los mismos.

Palabras clave: Matrix; Harry Potter; Buffy, cazavampiros; milenio; 1999; postmodernism.

Introduction

Let us remember 1999. Twenty years ago the parallel worlds of fiction and cultural theory coincided, and proceeded along a new alignment, driven by the appearance of the most important grouping of fictional texts of the last fifty years. Launched inside the cultural paradox of both profound millennial fears, and the knowing, self-confident cultural relativism of postmodernism, these texts promote a schizophrenic, conspiratorial world-view which, in commenting on them, cultural theory was only too happy to amplify, even if that meant missing the point of some of these key texts.

1999: a Year in Parallel

1999 was in many ways *the* year of the parallel world in film, television and written fiction. Such a scenario was not entirely unfamiliar to devotees of contemporary popular culture. In the previous year the *Truman Show* (directed by Peter Weir) had represented insurance salesman Truman Burbank living what he thought was a normal life; in fact all his experiences were being served up for him by reality television producer Christof, who manipulates Truman's existence in various ways in order to maintain audience ratings. In brief, Truman discovers his condition, escapes—and the audience changes TV channel.

Starring Jim Carrey, *The Truman Show* was in essence a comedy. Most of 1999's fictions are often witty, but are by no means comedies. They tended to be darker, in most cases apocalyptic, in tone. There isn't much to laugh at in these parallel worlds.

The film *The Matrix* (directed and written by the then Wachowski brothers[1], proposes that the 'reality' taken for granted by most humans is in fact a computer programme (the Matrix), which holds people in a consensual dreamscape in order to enslave them as a power source. A few people born outside this reality lead human resistance to it. A subaltern computer hacker, Neo, is guided by a father-figure, the apparent political terrorist Morpheus, through an educational process by which he can confront this double reality alongside his own sense of identity in crisis, in part through the deployment of his newly acquired powers against the forces trying to destroy human resistance.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (J.K. Rowling), the third of the six-novel series, is largely set in a parallel but hidden world not perceived by most humans, in which

1 Since making The Matrix and its sequels, writer-directors Larry and Andy Wachowski have transitioned to Lana and Lilly Wachowski. Their transition has been mapped back onto the film, making it in some eyes a transgender movie (Keegan).

witches and wizards deploy magical powers both for and against the greater good. Some of these magicians wish to acquire total domination over those humans not gifted with magical abilities, who they hold in total contempt; others resist them.

The Harry Potter novels see the young, orphaned protagonist leaving his suburban adoptive family and attend a boarding school dedicated to the study of magic. Here, he is guided by a father-figure (school headmaster Albus Dumbledore) through an educational process by which he can confront his own sense of an identity in crisis, in part through the deployment of his newly acquired powers against the forces within the wizarding world which are trying to destroy an independent humanity. This particular novel explores Harry's continuing identity crisis by narrating the hunt for Sirius Black, an escaped prisoner convicted of mass murder, who turns out to be a) innocent of these crimes, and b) Harry's godfather. This episode in Harry's long existential crisis is only resolved through a sublime post-Freudian confrontation when Harry invokes the spirit of his father to save the lives of both himself and his godfather at the hands of the Dementors, who are the monstrous prison guards of the magical world (and as such, they are employees of the wizarding world's government, the Ministry of Magic).

Meanwhile over in Sunnydale, California, in mid 1999 the fourth (of seven) television series of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (directed and written by Joss Whedon et al.) opened a third parallel world alongside the two with which devotees were already familiar: those of the humans and their enemies the vampires and demons, most of whom are intent on destroying humanity. In the previous three series, teenage schoolgirl Buffy Summers had been guided by a father-figure (school librarian and official 'watcher' Giles) through an educational process by which she could confront her own sense of an identity in crisis, in part through the deployment of her newly acquired powers against forces trying to destroy an independent humanity.

The fourth series of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers more of the same, though it also complicates matters somewhat. Firstly, Buffy's own (also very post-Freudian) identity crisis remains in play, as it has from the very first episode of the show. Buffy is now starting university and living in shared university accommodation. Her relationships with her mother, and Giles, keep shifting uneasily despite—or perhaps because of—her achievement of relatively independent young adulthood. Her newly fledged status means that Giles's official status is also changed—indeed, the scriptwriters underlined this firstly by introducing a substitute 'watcher', then permitting this substitute to fail, thus enabling Giles to continue as a more informal teacher and guide.

Secondly, in a gesture owing much to the immediate cult success of *The Matrix* (and also much to conspiracy theory more generally), Buffy and her friends the Scooby Gang now have to confront The Initiative, a shadowy government organisation led by one of the University's professors, which aims to capture a selection of vampires and demons, examine them experimentally, and then weaponise what they have learnt by making Adam, a part-demon, part-cyborg pastiche of the Frankenstein Monster.

These texts were not alone in invoking parallel worlds. In *Fight Club,* (directed by David Fincher in 1999 from Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel) the Matrix-like imposed reality of advertising- and debt-driven consumer culture is challenged, perhaps in the end overthrown, by the hidden-in-plain-sight reality of a blue-collar masculinity proving its own existence by homoeroticised physical contact (the 'fight club' of the title, which then forms the basis of a political resistance to consumerism). Kevin Smith's film *Dogma* (1999) depicts two fallen angels living on earth, who wish to re-enter heaven through what they perceive to be an error in Catholic dogma. As a side-effect of their plan, all life as we know would cease, so various human, angelic and Divine beings ally to stop them. In David Cronenbourg's film *Existenz* (1999), two characters running a complex virtual-reality video game, complete with an apparently human resistance movement against them (which claims that they are distorting reality) come to realise that they are in fact, à la *Truman Show*, characters in someone else's reality game. The film ends very ambivalently.

1999, then, was suffused with commercially successful, widely seen and read, texts representing the contemporary world as we apparently, routinely, inhabit it as merely one plane of existence; and representing the alternatives as in some way threatening to our continued existence. How might we understand this?

Remembering 1999

Firstly let us try to understand 1999 by a reminder of our considerable political and economic distance from it. This was a decade after the economic and political collapse of the Soviet Union and its eastern European empire, which had been greeted by Francis Fukuyama (among others) as a final victory for consumer capitalism, or what he tended to refer to as Western liberal democracy. Fukuyama argued that the failure of the Soviet empire marked not only the end of the Cold War, with all its associated fears of Mutually Assured Destruction, but also the end of any potential future for communism as a viable political and economic project. In a sense, therefore, this marked the 'end of history'—at least in the way that 'history' had been envisioned by Karl Marx, the great prophet of the inevitability of communism.

For a while, Fukuyama seemed to be right. Though the suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square dissidents indicated that the Chinese version of communism remained very much in place as a political system, its economic model was very different from the Soviet version, having been heavily modified in the 1970s to include capitalist elements. The world—as seen in 1999—seemed destined for a future of peaceful trade and economic growth (if not, as critics pointed out, of the equitable distribution of the consequently generated wealth). There seemed to be no alternative to this 'capitalist realism' (Fisher).

Two subsequent wake-up calls modified this sense of liberal optimism and left disquiet. Firstly, the attack on the United States of America on September 11th 2001 actualised fears of a new political enemy of freedom (in Fukuyama's sense) formed by well-funded Islamic extremist opponents of the USA and its allies' global influence. The medium-term legacy of these fears, including neo-imperialist wars waged by the USA and its allies against some Middle Eastern

regimes, and Islamist terrorist attacks on soft Western targets, continues (Burke; Greenstock; Nesser).

Secondly, the international financial collapse of 2007-8, and subsequent policies of cutbacks in public services while the wealthy gamblers who had helped to instigate the crisis largely went unpunished, led to severe disillusion with existing Western political institutions, including the European Union as the embodiment of free trade and the free movement of people, and the liberal vision of the United States as the leader of globalised capital and continual inward immigration (Blyth; Tooze).

The consequent revival of nationalist and anti-immigration sentiment shocked both the liberal elites who were the direct beneficiaries of globalised consumer capitalism, and their subaltern supporters, the socially liberal left (who don't benefit much, but haven't quite cottoned on). Meanwhile this disillusion with established politics, sometimes characterised as a rejection of all expertise, also threatened the growing scientific consensus that planet earth was in the grip of a catastrophic, human-induced crisis of climate change and species extinction, which could only be properly addressed through global action (Mishra; Eatwell and Goodwin).

Our current lived experience is not, then, that of the world in 1999. However, the planet did not sleep soundly even at that, arguably, collectively happier moment. The immediate context of the texts under discussion—the year 1999—included a number of violent incidents, and one collectively shared nightmare, which are worth recall.

On April 20th 1999, two high school students attending Columbine High School in the eponymous town in Colorado shot to death twelve of their fellow students, one teacher, and finally themselves, in the school's library. Twenty-one others were injured. The perpetrators had also tried to bomb other parts of the school premises; their homemade devices—pipe bombs and car bombs which had been intended to kill and maim hundreds of school students and staff—failed to explode. The carbine rifle, pump-action shotgun, double-barrelled shotgun, semi-automatic handgun and other handguns used in the killings had been acquired legally by others, and given or sold to the shooters.

In the aftermath of the killings it emerged that one of the perpetrators had created an increasingly hate-filled website/blog, and both of them had written journals and made videotapes detailing aspects of what had clearly been a long-planned event. It also emerged that the pair had been fans of rock and heavy metal bands such as Marilyn Manson, Nine Inch Nails, Rammstein, and KMFDM; of violent and ethically complex films such as *Apocalypse Now, Natural Born Killers, The Basketball Diaries* and *Lost Highway*; and of aggressive shoot-'em-up computer games such as *Doom, Quake, Duke Nukem* and *Postal.* Much was made of the apparent cultural pessimism, nihilism, hatred and violence encoded in all these cultural forms, which some believed had been direct causes of the massacre. The shooters had lived, it seemed, in a cultural parallel world whose effects threatened normal everyday existence (Brooks; Cullen).

"Earshot", the eighteenth episode of the third season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, was due to air in the week following the Columbine shooting. The episode included a sequence in which a high school student is seen loading a rifle and taking up a high vantage point overlooking the school. Though the motive turns out to be suicide rather than murder, and he is dissuaded from this course of action by Buffy, the episode's broadcast was postponed until the following September. The final show in that same season, "Graduation Day part 2", which showed a predatory monster, many vampires, and general crowd violence, at Buffy's high school, was also postponed (from an original broadcast date of May 18th 1999, to July 13th 1999).

On November 30th and December 1st 1999, the global convention of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, Washington State, USA, attracted the largest-scale street protests so far against economic globalisation, in which tens of thousands of activists marched, chanted and in some cases rioted. The ways in which global capital disempowered almost everyone had been the subject of *No Logo*, a bestselling and highly influential 1999 book by the Canadian journalist Naomi Klein. Her account of the transfer of jobs to the poorest economies (in which workers were least safe and most financially exploited), and the hostile and deeply manipulative power of advertising and branding, was an important part of the cultural background to a protest which ranged far wider than the book's target readership of concerned middle class professionals and liberal-left academics.

As delegates began to arrive in Seattle for the next round of WTO talks, a loose and partly mutually contradictory coalition of trade unionists, environmentalists, activists for developing world social justice, and anarchistic anti-capitalist agitators took part in a number of mostly carefully planned protests, blockades of key buildings and transport links, along with some more spontaneous property-damaging riots, all of whose scale took the authorities by surprise. The ceremony planned for the opening day of the convention had to be abandoned, as many delegates were barricaded in their hotels. Subsequent police over-reaction was effective only in scale: rather than quelling the actual disturbances, and/or arresting the principals, the police and National Guard took the simpler route of firstly tear-gassing everything that moved, and then arresting everyone who stayed still long enough, 157 of whom (mostly Seattle citizens who had been caught up the day's events) were later compensated for wrongful arrest. The police overtime and clean-up bill of at least $3 million acted as a powerful deterrent to future potential host cities of such meetings (Wood; Kiely).

So to the nightmare. Fear of a parallel world within popular culture which could incite large-scale violence, and fear of the consequences of a free trade system rigged by and in the interests of a few powerful players—and protected by repressive policing equally in the interests of those same few, who seemed to live in a parallel world of secure privilege—were joined by a more general, and perhaps more globally pervasive, fear of the effects of new technology.

In a sense this fear was not new. From *Frankenstein* (Shelley) onwards, western culture has carried within it powerful expressions of fear of the power of science to distort and

dehumanise, indeed to displace humanity altogether. As the millennium approached, however, this fear was inverted.

Again, let us remember the world in 1999. Mobile phones were not yet 'smart', but merely portable devices on which people made telephone calls. (The then market leader in mobile phones was a Finnish company, Nokia, whose products were memorably placed in *The Matrix).* The World Wide Web was only six years old as a domestic phenomenon, and online shopping was not yet a routine part of life. However, many of the world's financial and social security functions were already fully computerised, and some elements of computerisation were domestically pervasive (microchips controlled functions such as washing machine programmes, or car fuel injection systems). And, we were told, *every* chip, certainly every computer and every software programme, was permanently stuck in the twentieth century, thanks to a programming convention that saw dates stored in the format yymmdd (year, month, day, as for example 980412, the 12th April 1998). With only two storage bits for the year, as the new millennium dawned, how would a computer know whether we were now in the year 2000, or back in 1900? And if these machines could not tell the difference, what would be the consequences—for salary or pensions payments for example?

The resulting fear was known as the 'millennium bug' or Y2K. Many governments, organisations and companies spent billions of dollars trying to ensure that their computerised systems would not collapse overnight. Many others lived in fear of the supposed consequences, while still others made careers from hyping it up. Michael S. Hyatt's book *The Millennium Bug: How to Survive the Coming Chaos*, for example, is an exercise in full-scale fear-mongering, predicting (as a worst case scenario) significant interruptions to power and water supplies and phone calls to emergency services, as well as to payment systems (Hyatt; Whisman).

While this did not happen, it's worth remembering that all these events/non-events, and the fears associated with them, were a vital part of the context in which Harry Potter and his father's guardian spirit defeated the Dementors, Neo built up enough self-belief to take on and overcome the Agents, and Buffy Summers and friends attacked and eventually destroyed The Initiative and its monstrous cyborg creation Adam.

1999 and the Irruption of Theory

Looking at all these texts alongside those millennial fears (and, as we shall see momentarily, also alongside postmodern confidence), this paper argues that the texts under discussion led to *the* moment at which cultural theory, which usually exists lost in a parallel world of its own—academic conferences, and books and papers no-one reads—took its brief place in the sun. 1999's partially-hidden worlds, with their implicit threats to the survival of human freedom, were understood in academia through the explicit deployment of philosophical and theoretical discourses.

In the case of *The Matrix* the invitation was offered, irresistibly, by the film itself. In an early scene leading character Neo opens what looks like a book—Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and*

Simulation, opening at the first page of the book's final chapter "On Nihilism"—to reveal that as the title might imply it is not a book but a simulation of one. It is in fact a box full of minidiscs (a then fashionable digital storage medium), containing what are, we presume, illegal software programmes. On receiving one of these, Neo's customer calls him 'my own personal Jesus Christ'. The customer of *The Matrix* DVD, on the other hand, was given not illegal software but a commentary on the film by professional philosophers including Cornell West, who liked it so much he was given a walk-on part in the film's sequels.

Offering up these red rags attracted many bulls to this particular china shop. Within eighteen months of the film's appearance, articles echoing the philosophers' commentary and exploring the philosophical, religious and intercultural significance of *The Matrix* were appearing in academic journals (e.g. Kilbourn; Barnett; Simpkins; Lavery; Stroud). This is an unusually fast turn-around time for such publications to go through peer review and the rest of the editorial process, so the articles must have been written quickly. Books followed after a slightly longer (but still impressively short) gestation period. William Irwin, who had already served up pop-philosophy edited collections on *Seinfeld and Philosophy* (2000) and *The Simpsons and Philosophy* (2001) launched *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real* in 2002; this was followed by another Irwin edited collection, *More Matrix and Philosophy: Revolutions and Reloaded Decoded* (2005), by which time the Matrix commentary industry was already in full swing, with Glenn Yefreth's *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in the Matrix Trilogy* appearing in 2003, and Matt Lawrence's *Like Splinter Your Mind: the Philosophy Behind the Matrix Trilogy,* and Matthew Kappell and William G. Doty's *Jacking in to the Matrix Franchise: Cultural Reception and Interpretation* appearing in 2004.

Though they were not surrounded by such inviting, publisher-sponsored critical apparatuses, similar interpretive armies were soon explaining the cultural significance of Harry Potter (e.g. Blake; Baggett and Klein), and Buffy Summers (e.g. Wilcox; Levine and Parks). But why, at this point? Or rather (since academic commentary on aspects of popular culture was not a new phenomenon)[2], why in such quantity at this point? And quantity there was—Kapell and Doty report that they had over 150 potential submissions within two days of seeking contributions for their forthcoming collection. They comment that "readers may be surprised to realise the hundreds of courses[3] worldwide which focus upon elements of the *Matrix* universe" (3)[4].

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2 Perhaps the most comprehensive example of cultural theory fully integrated in popular culture was the discussion of post-punk music in the British weekly music newspaper Sounds, c. 1978-1991. But the music discussed was never 'mainstream' in the sense that the Harry Potter novels, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Matrix* became globally successful.

3 By 'course' is here meant a component of a degree programme, not the full programme itself.

4 The quite staggering amount of secondary literature on Harry Potter—including scholarly conferences and symposia, books and articles, but not fan websites or fan fiction—can be found in Cornelia Rémi's constantly updated online bibliography.

Another author who has written on *The Matrix*, Chad Barnett, hits on one of the principal reasons for this plethora:

> The reason is all around us: its success is a confirmation of America's love affair with the postmodernist aesthetic. America simply loves the manifestations and symptoms of postmodern culture. Consider, for example, hits like *The Truman Show, Pleasantville, Sliding Doors, The Game*, and *The Thirteenth Floor*—all works in which the ontological stability of worlds is shaken by trompe-l'oeil strategies or mirror realities (362-63).

What, though, does he mean by "the postmodernist aesthetic"? Barnett's principal cues about the normalisation of this ontological instability are from François Lyotard, who had announced the death of the "grand narratives" such as religion and Marxism (Lyotard); and Fredric Jameson, who posited that in the absence of such commonly accepted totalising explanatory systems, we inhabited an era of pastiche rather than parody, in which the promiscuous mixing of high and low cultural forms was the norm rather than the exception, and no-one thought these mixtures either unsettling or amusing (Jameson). In which case, claims Barnett,

> *The Matrix* employs this postmodern aesthetic brilliantly. The film is a grand assemblage, a collage of constructed borrowings (…) in which the Action, Western, Romance, Japanese Anime, and Hong Kong Kung Fu genres all mingle to enhance the constructed nature of the film and the virtual reality that it depicts (…) it blends these cultural fragments without the ulterior motive, satirical impulse, or laughter (…) The cultural logic of late capitalism dictates that stylistic diversity and heterogeneity are the formal features of society and aesthetic production (…) because standard modes of discourse no longer exist. As a heterotopian construct, *The Matrix* functions as an allegory representing the distinct and contrasting modes of discourse that have come to define both culture and aesthetic production in late capitalist society (363-64).

One might say the same of both Harry Potter and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, though with one significant reservation, discussed below. The Harry Potter novels blend myth and legend, people in the present day wearing medieval and modern costume, Victorian and mid-twentieth century boarding school stories, and contemporary issues and concerns about among other things race, gender and identity; the purposes of education; and the nature of politics. *Buffy* similarly combines myth and legend, Victorian and modern vampire stories, girls' school adventure stories, and adolescent soap opera with its worries over gender, sexuality and identity, together with similar anxiety over the nature and purposes of education; and like *The Matrix*, it does so using all the audio and video techniques at its disposal. In the words of musicologist Anahid Kassabian:

> Pitched to a concatenation of audiences generally ignored by producers and programmers—indie kids, vampire fans, and pop culture critics—[*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*] made a virtue of trading in practices generally eschewed by television writers—multiple, constant and demanding intertextual references; complex and anti-realist narrative strategies; and creative and challenging uses of music and sound (249).

It's worth noting, as Barnett doesn't, the very postmodern multi-level and multicultural sound design of both *Buffy* and *The Matrix.* Compared with the Hollywood norm, *The Matrix* has a genuinely hybrid music soundtrack. Don Davis's score, defiantly and surprisingly modernist classical music offset by minimalism, and played by a big Western orchestra, is punctuated at appropriate moments by Anglo-American indie, rock, dance, and metal. The importance of the music mixture to the project as a whole can be gleaned from Davis's full-movie commentary on *The Matrix* DVD—it's very unusual for a film composer to be given so much space on DVD extras. Christophe Beck and others' music scores for *Buffy*, whose hybrid musical world also included a great deal of indie rock alongside orchestral segments, is discussed at length in Attinello et al, for which Beck provides an interesting though brief preface (xxiii).

It's also worth noting that reservation. Pastiche without parody does not mean lack of humour. We don't laugh *at*, but we should be able to smile *with*, postmodern texts. By and large, postmodern intertextual relations were conducted with a graceful wit and sense of playful irony which brings a knowing smile to the face. The *Buffy* scripts are joyful celebrations of the dialogue of the young (even if the dialogue itself was invented by middle-aged scriptwriters); the Harry Potter novels are wittily double-coded, to keep adults reading to their children amused (which is one reason they were such a great success, and that Bloomsbury issued them with optional sombre 'adult' covers). However, it's difficult, as Barnett implies, to find much wit or other humour in *The Matrix* (and, music apart, more or less impossible to do so in the sequels).

Each of our texts owes a debt to conspiracy theory, which Jameson has characterised as one of the principal substitutes, in the postmodern era, for those reassuring grand narratives:

> conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system. It is in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that, in my opinion, the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized (38).

By 'garish narrative manifestations' Jameson means cyberpunk, the mutant generic offspring of—in general—the work of writer Philip K. Dick, and in particular of influential texts such as Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner,* the first two *Terminator* movies, and William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer.* It's a category into which *The Matrix* can be fitted reasonably comfortably, a case which has been argued well (Barnett; Gillis). However, while it would be

more difficult to attach the label 'cyberpunk' to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and impossible to use it for Harry Potter, they are clearly in some way related through Jameson's formula, each in those 1999 manifestations of their series dealing with resistance to one or more aspects of "that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality".

Among the more distinguished commentators to contribute to the first of the Irwin volumes on *The Matrix* and philosophy was the Lacanian psychoanalyst and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek. In his analysis of the movie, Žižek, following his master's bidding, claims that "there is no absolute Real against which to judge the symbolic system of the Matrix: the Real is not the 'true reality' behind the virtual simulation, but the void which makes reality incomplete or inconsistent, and the function of every symbolic Matrix is to conceal this inconsistency (…)" ("The Matrix" 246). Žižek almost immediately went on to produce an interesting response to the events of September 11th 2001, drawing his audience in by titling his little book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*—as well as the subtitle of the Irwin reader, this is of course a Baudrillardan phrase used by Morpheus in *The Matrix.* Though this discussion is far less dismissive of the 'real' than his earlier thoughts on the movie, he points out that it—and many other Hollywood spectaculars such as *Independence Day* (directed by Roland Emmerich 1996), and *Executive Decision* (directed by Stuart Baird, 1996)—had in fact *pre-imagined* the catastrophic attack on the Twin Towers. There was a real, and threatening, parallel world behind these imaginings; it just hadn't manifested yet. When it did, these texts' meanings changed: but that wasn't in 1999[5].

Afterword: another Matrix of Meaning: the eve of the Millennium

Two other mainstream movies from 1999 should be mentioned, as we move towards a conclusion. They should have been included with the other texts, though they aren't usually assembled in such company (partly because neither film pleased the critics). Like Kevin Smith's *Dogma*, both *Stigmata* (directed by Rupert Wainwright, and *End of Days* (directed by Peter Hyams) take for granted cultural knowledge of Christianity in some of its historic manifestations. *Stigmata's* plot revolves around a version of the Gospel which the Catholic Church considers to be heresy; its parallel world is the *Exorcist*-like supernatural interventions visited on one of the principal characters. In *End of Days,* a young woman is identified as the daughter of Satan, who appears (in the form of a banker) and tries to impregnate her, an action which will apparently bring about the 'end of days' through the birth of the Antichrist. She is saved from this incestuous fate, and from various attempts by Catholic clergy to kill her in order to prevent it, firstly by a human hero; and in the end by direct Divine intervention. As the film ends, the Millennium—that's the two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ—is celebrated.

As noted above, neither film pleased the critics (though both were reasonably successful at the box office). These films' explicitly millennial appeal was obvious, as it should have been in the case of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Buffy* series four and *The Matrix.*

5 Despite the hint in footnote 1 above, it isn't the purpose of this paper to register or properly discuss the legacies of these 1999 texts, each of which has a multi-layered, complex and interesting after-life.

Subsequent discussion has indeed pointed to Neo's death and resurrection (by a carrier of love, named Trinity), and the meaning of *The Matrix* has been interpreted as Christian above all else (a thesis comprehensively discussed in Seay and Garrett). The connection is even recognised by William Irwin (though he uses it as a pretext to discuss Socrates): "Many people recognise *The Matrix* as a retelling of 'the greatest story ever told'. The biblical imagery is clear, and the film's release on Easter weekend 1999 supports the intent" (5).

Or perhaps not. As well as registering the impact of historical events on the ways in which we read fictions, one of the many problems we have in 'reading 1999' from our 2019 vantage point is that the texts we are dealing with are not stand-alone texts but parts of sequences, whose meaning could change as they progressed. In the case of *The Matrix* there are two film sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*; a series of short films *The Animatrix*; two computer games, *Enter the Matrix* and *The Matrix Online;* a series of comic books; and a companion multi-DVD collection, *The Ultimate Matrix,* which includes thirty-five hours of supplementary material and discussion. All these extra materials complicated the first movie's fairly direct representation of 'my own personal Jesus Christ', Neo, as the Saviour of Humanity who dies and is resurrected; though the opposition of the human versus inhuman worlds, and Neo's eventual death and resurrection/incorporation as a machine (at the end of *Matrix Revolutions)*, remain the heart of the matter.

However complex this may be in the postmodern mix that is the fully reloaded *Matrix*, in the case of Harry Potter and Buffy Summers, reading the sequences as a whole clarifies the matter, and the mass of extra matter on each character—films, comics, fanfic and websites—offers no contradiction[6]. Each is a Christ-like figure who returns from the dead in order to defeat the forces of evil. Buffy dies to save the world twice: at the end of the first series, and at the end of the fifth. She is revived on each occasion by the love (and magical power) of friends. At the end of the seventh series' final television broadcast, reformed vampire Spike sacrifices his own life to save the world, a gesture born of love for Buffy; he is then resurrected in the series' parallel, the five-season *Angel,* where following Buffy's example, and alongside her other former vampire lover Angel, he continues the fight against the forces of darkness. They have become Buffy's apostles.

Harry is apparently killed by Voldemort towards the end of the seventh and final book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. In an idea influenced, I presume, by J.R.R. Tolkien's deeply Catholic short story *Leaf by Niggle,* Harry wakes at what seems to be a railway station connecting him to the afterlife, where he meets Dumbledore—who died at the end of book six, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. After they discuss matters, Harry is returned to life on earth, in order to defeat the Nazi-like evil of Voldemort. The texts discussed

6 It should be acknowledged that material on both Harry Potter and Buffy massively exceeds their first iterations—including the Harry Potter and Fantastic Beasts films; and a sequence of comic books by Joss Whedon, taking the Buffy story forward; together with much fan-generated material. Some of this extra material may be found via the *The Buffyverse Wiki* and *Pottermore*.

here are Millennial, in a specifically Christian sense, and they therefore belong more completely to 1999 than some of their subsequent readers have realised (exceptions include Seay and Greg; Yeffeth; Gray).

Postscript

If academic commentary doesn't respond, immediately and comprehensively, to popular culture, it is not doing its job. This may, perhaps should, mean continuous reinvention of the project of academic criticism, along the lines identified by Kapell and Doty, in discussing their volume on *The Matrix:*

> contributions (including mythological models, feminism, racism, religious practice, postmodernity and ironically dealing with the 'real') (…) are indicative of the present-day reaching across traditional disciplinary divides that have long ruled university life based upon nineteenth-century German distinctions between the humanities, social, and 'natural' sciences (…) To our way of thinking, it is in areas of *interdisciplinary overlap* that important intellectual breakthroughs occur (4-5).

In other words, we should resume our practise of postmodernity as a way of life (which certainly seemed to be with us in 1999, and lasted until the 2001 attacks and/or the 2008 financial crash brought the kind of playful, knowing irony I have associated with postmodernist aesthetics to an end). In the absence of those consensual postmodern uncertainties, political conviction has reappeared, and with it the revival of significant and potentially dangerous political divisions; in the light of which these menacing but still apparently fictional parallel worlds of 1999, presented playfully in complex popular texts, are the proper object of regret: worlds we have lost.

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